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AUTHOR Malden, Cynthia L.
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ABSTRACT

Through the narratives of North American slaves a vivid picture of their lives, struggles, hopes, and aspirations emerges. The slave narrative arose as a response to, and a refutation of, claims that blacks could not write. Slave writings were often direct extensions of speech. Through a process of imitation and repetition, the black slave's narrative came to be a communal utterance rather than merely an individual's autobiography. The narrators went to great trouble in learning to read and write. Some whites taught the slaves, some unwittingly, some for their own benefit, and some out of a sense of Christian duty. Blacks who learned to read and write, and the people who taught them, faced stiff punishment. Some slaves were whipped, others killed. The most common penalty was amputation. The hardships of life as a slave made learning nearly impossible. Literacy for the slaves was a means of empowerment, a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, and a means of developing critical thinking skills. For the slave narrators, writing was also a vehicle for expressing self-identity, as well as a political demonstration of resistance. Literacy was the key to spiritual, mental, and in some cases, physical freedom. (SG)

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THE SLAVE NARRATIVE: AN IMAGE OF EXCELLENCE

By

Cynthia L. Malden

Volunteer State Community College

Presented to

Southeastern Conference On English

In The Two-Year College

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For my great-great-great grandmother, Fannie
and my great-great-grandmother, Nellie
and all the others who endured

BACKGROUND

In 1619 twenty Africans aboard a Dutch ship landed in Jamestown, Virginia, indentured servants who were traded for food which the Dutch crew was in need of. By 1710, the number had increased to 50,000. Unlike those who first came, these were slaves. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, there were 500,000 slaves in the United States. By 1860, the twenty Negroes who landed at Jamestown in 1619 had become 4,000,000 (Bennett 38). These statistics however alarming tell nothing about the people who were enslaved. But through their narratives a vivid picture of their lives, struggles, hopes and aspirations is painted. It is through their stories that we see just how important literacy was, to what extent they would go to to acquire these skills, and the definitive link between literacy and freedom. We see a people striving for excellence and they themselves symbols of determination, fortitude, courage and faith---symbols of excellence.

NARRATORS

The slave narrative arose as a response to, and a refutation of, claims that blacks could not write. These narratives reached the full peak of their strength during the twenty or so years before the fall of slavery. When the "peculiar institution" was most repressive, seeking to expand into the territories and acquire ever more control over federal policy, is the time when the best of the slave narrators came forth to write stories on paper as vivid as the ones engraved on their backs. They give us eyewitness accounts of the furnace of misery in the Old South that supplied raw materials for the Industrial Revolution. Taking

into consideration the differences between "kind" and "cruel" masters, and between aspects of the system that varied from state to state, these early autobiographies sought to assemble a weight of evidence against slavery that would crush it in every aspect before the court of world opinion. The lives reflected in them were consumed to fuel the factories of capitalism. The used-up bodies could be tossed into the compost of slavery's "bargain basements," where Negroes too old to work in the fields had their hair blacked to make them look younger and were sold at inflated prices to customers unaware of the cheat. Or, if no market existed for them, they might be turned out to starve in the woods, or literally thrown in the garbage can; more than one writer describes seeing a slave murdered in broad daylight before witnesses, and his body left in the gutter to be picked up by the trash collection the next day(Butterfield 11).

The narrators were among those thousands who resisted, who escaped from the "yawning oven," protected from the heat by the angel of revolutionary purpose. Often they clung to survival under the worst imaginable conditions. They had no rights whatever that could not be violated at any time according to their master's discretion. Their standard of living was sometimes below that of the cows and chickens they were classified with, and a smile at the wrong time or a word of discontent might suddenly escalate into a beating that would leave them crippled for life. Most of them experienced the full range of horrors: they were torn from their families, underclothed, overworked, whipped, sold, starved, chained, tortured, raped, made to watch atrocities against loved ones, hunted by dogs, deceived and betrayed under all kinds of circumstances by whites from every social class. They won their way to freedom past slave catchers and patrol teams and then wrote as a means of fighting back against their enemies(Butterfield 12). Out of a desire to convict those who enslaved, the escaped slaves used the most

enduring weapon at their disposal, the printing press. Often serving an apprenticeship in rhetoric and oratory on the anti-slavery lecture circuit, a small group of talented and articulate ex-slaves published narrative accounts of their lives and times in bondage.

FORM

The slave writings were often direct extentions of their speeches, and many ex-slaves narrators confessed that their printed texts were formal revisions of their spoken words organized and promoted by anti-slavery organizations. The slave narratives came to resemble each other, both in their content and in their formal shape. So similar was the structure of these narratives that it sometimes seems to the modern reader that the slave authors were tracing a shared pattern, and then cutting that pattern from similar pieces of cloth. There can be little doubt that, when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading and rereading, the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them (Gates x).

COMMUNAL VOICE

In this process of imitation and repetition, the black slaves's narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual's autobiography. Each slave author, in writing about his or her personal life's experiences, simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive throughout the South. Each author, then, knew that all black slaves would be judged--on their character, integrity, intelligence, manners and morals, and their claims to warrant emancipation--on this published evidence provided by one of their number. The slave authors therefore had to satisfy the dual expectations of shaping the random events

of their lives into a meaningful and compelling pattern while also making the narrative of their odyssey from slavery to freedom an emblem of every black person's potential for higher education and the desire to be free. The black writer's acceptance was determined, to this extent, by his or her mastery of words. This was a large order. Nevertheless, the ex-slave rose to the challenge, creating the largest body of literature ever created by ex-slaves and giving birth thereby to the African-American literary tradition (Gates x).

We can achieve an idea of the role that the words of ex-slaves were able to play in the fight against slavery by these comments published between 1845 and 1855. Lucius C. Matlock wrote in 1845:

> Naturally and necessarily, the enemy of literature,(American slavery) has become the prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative. From the soil of slavery itself have sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system...Startling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos, from the pen of self-emancipated slaves do now exhibit slavery in such revolting aspects, as to secure the excrations of all good men and become a monument more enduring than marble, in testimony strong as sacred writ against it (Gates xi).

REPRESSION

The whole repressive energies of the slave system had been devoted to keeping the slaves ignorant and fearful, and they had to discover some means within themselves to free their minds as well as their bodies from this legacy and the

narrative was that instrument. Even in the antislavery movement, they were often urged into mere support roles for white activists and discouraged from developing their own powers of speech and thought. The narratives fought theses forms of oppression too, tesifying to the mental capacities of the slave, arguing tirelessly for his humanity, answering over and over the same shallow, contemptible rationalizations for slavery, demanding equal treatment for black people in all areas of public life and wrestling with the mental devils of self-doubt and despair. Autobiography in their hands became powerful tools, providing convincing testimony of human resource, intelligence, endurance and love in the face of tyranny. In a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing (Butterfield 12).

LITERACY

In literacy and ultimately in the autobiography, the slave and ex-slave found that advantage which the master had fought so hard to keep from him. Through literacy (reading and writing) he found the key that would free him mentally, spiritually, and physically and help him to survive and to grow as a human being. Literacy opened up worlds of possibility. It was a key that allowed the slave to envision a time when he would be free and could work to better his condition ,one in which he would be his own master.

METHODS OF SECURING EDUCATION

Reading and writing meant freedom of different sorts for the slave, but it did not come easy. He usually had to devise methods or schemes to secure this education. Thomas

Johnson and ex-slave and later a missionary speaking in England often told how he accomplished his goal. He secreted an old Bible in his room and poured over it in his spare time, beginning with Genesis and calling out the letters of each word he could not understand: "In the b-e-ginning God c-r-e-a-t-e-d the heaven and the earth." His young master read aloud a chapter from the New Testament every night, and Johnson tried to get him to read the same one over and over. When Johnson knew this chapter practically by heart, he recognized the words in the chapter. Then he found identical words elsewhere in the Bible and traced identical syllables of other words. "In this way," he related, "I got to understand a little about the Bible, and at the same time I was learning to spell(Cornelius 60). Douglass states in his narrative:

> In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. The plan which I adopted and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

Douglas also learned to write in a similar way:

> The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus-"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus "S." ...I soon learned these letters and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them...After that, when I met with any boy who knew I could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he...I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that...During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk.

WHITES TAUGHT

Just as Douglass tricked whites into teaching him to read so did other slaves. Whites were often causal, even unwitting, instructors, not realizing the impact of the power they were giving slaves. Other whites taught purposefully, for practical reasons; they could use literate slaves for their own needs. Others, influenced by the belief that literacy was an essential component of human progress, taught slaves to read in defiance of law and custom through traditional "Bible literacy", a compelling motive but one with inherent contradictions. The Christian

belief that all should read the Bible influenced some whites. A handful of white missionaries, evangelists, and lay Christians in the South insisted that slaves should be taught to read the scriptures. They disregarded or protested any laws to the contrary and contributed to the number of slaves who could read by the end of the Civil War. They not only taught slaves but stirred the consciences of less missionary-minded Southerners to allow their slaves to learn. They also trained black leaders and when possible, protected black schools and Sunday schools against mob fears of an enlightened slave population (Cornelius 4).

Punishment

Slaves who could read did risk grim punishments. In his autobiography, written after he escaped from slavery, Leonard Black declared that when he first bought a book, his master found the book and burnt it, warning him, "If I ever know you to have a book again, I will whip you half to death." Black bought another, however, and suffered the punishment: he related that his master "made me sick of books by beating me like a dog...he whipped me so severely that he overcame my thirst for knowledge, and I relinquished its pursuit until after I absconded." In Ashley County, Arkansas, in 1862, Joseph Booker's father, Albert was charged with "spoiling good niggers" by teaching them to read and was whipped to death when Joseph was three years old. James Lucas' owner "hung the best slave he had" for trying to teach the others how to spell. However, the most common widely known penalty for learning to read and write was amputation. African-Americans who were slaves as children in South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Mississippi told similar stories about this punishment. Doc Daniel Dowdy recited the lesson well: "The first time you was caught trying to read or write you was whipped with a

cow-hide the next time with a cat-o-nine tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger." Southern whites were in a unique position: they sought to prevent enslaved African-Americans from learning to read just as mass literacy was being vigorously promoted in England and in the northern United States as a positive good, necessary for training the citizens of a republic and for accustoming the population to industrial routine. Their defensiveness at being out of step made white Southerners increasingly adamant against literacy for their own enslaved working population (Cornelius 6).

DECODING AND COMPREHENSION

Not only was the threat of death and amputation very real possibilities, but learning to read was a complex and arduous task. Today's reading theories illuminate the complex process of reading and explain why it can take so long. Reading is considered to be a two-pronged effort, involving both decoding and comprehension. Switching from decoding to comprehension is time consuming -the best parallel is that of reading in a foreign language, in which first the words are translated (decoding) and then meaning is derived (comprehension). With fragmented time, few teacher guides, and limited vocabulary, even for the most determined slave it could take years to learn to read. Add the physical threats to other obstacles and the process becomes heroic (Cornelius 68).

Lucius Holsey's account of his attempts at reading illustrates the ordeal. When he decided to learn, Holsey. a house slave, collected and sold enough rags to buy five books: two Webster's "blue-back" spellers, a school dictionary, Milton's Paradise Lost, and a Bible. White children and an old black man taught him the alphabet, and the rest he did on his own. As he recounted:

> Day by day, I took a leaf from one of the spelling books, and so folded it that one or two of the lessons were on the outside as if printed on a card. This I put in the pocket of my vest or coat, and when I was sitting in the carriage, walking the streets, or working in the yard or using hoe or spade, or in the dining room I would take out my spelling leaf, catch a word and commit it to memory. When one side of the spelling leaf was finished by this process, I would refold it...with a new lesson on the outside...Besides, I could catch words from the whites and retain them in memory until I could get to my dictionary. Then I would spell and define the words, until they became perfectly impressed upon my memory.

Holsey used decoding and then comprehension to learn. He memorized individual words and spelled new ones-decoding-and then defined them-comprehension, which impressed them on his memory. He learned from the printed page by carrying it with him, a method recommended to beginning adult readers today, and also from listening to the words, which is another path to reading. Thomas G. Sticht and James H. James, for example, propose that in learning to read, people close the gap between auding and reading skills, that is they become capable of recognizing in printed form words and syntactic constructions they could previously recognize only in spoken form. An excellent demonstration of learning to read by sound comes from Sella Martin's account of his childhood as a slave. Separated from his mother, he was forced to work as an errand boy in a Columbus, Georgia hotel where he listened to his white co-workers holding betting matches over spelling. In this way, he recalled, "I learned to spell by sound before I knew by sight a single letter in the alphabet." Then he tried to spell the signs he saw along the

streets. Street and store signs were common decoding manuals for urban slaves. Benjamin Holmes, for example, was an apprentice tailor in Charleston. As he carried bundles of clothing around town, he studied all the signs and all the names on the doors and asked people to tell him a word or two at a time. By the time he was twelve, he found he could read newspapers (Cornelius 69).

Most slaves who learned to read, though, like other American children of that era, did so from a speller, and most often the "blue-back" speller- the book which, next to the Bible, was most common in the average home. Noah Webster's Elementary Spelling Book, which sold over twenty million copies in nineteenth century, would be a challenge to the beginning reader in today's schools. Its words were printed about the size of those in a modern fifth-grade reader, it had few pictures, and its lessons were crowded on a few pages, beginning with the alphabet on one page and on to syllables and consonant combinations on the next. Its step-by-step method, which heavily emphasized pronunciation, may have been tedious in the classroom but was a useful decoding tool for the resourceful person who had to teach himself, including those slaves who took on this challenge.

The speller's wide usage was shown by the number of former slaves who could quote those first vowel and consonant combinations decades after they had learned them. These combinations were part of a common body of references. Everyone knew how much learning was signified by having gone through the "ab, eb, ib, ubs." Several former slaves proudly remembered having mastered the speller as far as "baker" and "shady," the first two-syllable words in the speller (Cornelius 70). To "spell to baker," the beginning reader had confronted nine pages of syllables, words, and consonant combinations, with from 80-200 new combinations introduced on each page, and had read one syllable sentences like these:

Fire will burn wood and coal.

When you eat, hold the fork in your left hand.
Good boys and girls will act well.

An illustration of how sound is a foundation is provided in the first few pages of the narrative of Thomas Jones, who escaped from slavery and wrote his own story, published in Canada in 1853. Jones worked in his master's store in Wilmington, North Carolina, bought a speller, and eventually found a white boy who taught him every day during lunchtime for six cents a week until he learned words of two syllables. After the teaching was stopped, however, Jones continued to work through the speller by himself until he got into words of five syllables. To do this in Webster's speller meant that he had gone through over sixty pages of new words and sentences and would have been reading sentences like these:

An extemporary discourse is one spoken without notes or premeditation.
Intemperate people are exposed to inflammatory diseases.

These former slaves claimed to have gone all the way through the "blue back" and on to other books were reading at what would now be considered at least twelth grade level. Former slaves recalled a reverence for the speller which was surpassed only by their regard for the Bible. Some former slaves, however, also recalled their sudden realization that they could read. Mastering the speller only provided the decoding; reading involves comprehension, which requires that the reader bring a memory store to reading: knowledge of grammar, word associations, and general knowledge of the world. As S.Jay Samuels and Michael L. Kamil describe it, there is a "click of comprehension" when the textual information coming in from outside the head matches with the concepts stored inside the head (Cornelius 70). When she was

ninety years old, Belle Myers still recalled her childhood experience with this "click of comprehension," her sudden realization that she could read. She had learned her letters while caring for the owner's baby who was playing with alphabet blocks. Despite brutal discouragement (her master, seeing what she was doing, kicked her with his muddy boots), Myers slipped around and practiced her letters and studied the "blue back" speller. One day, she recalled, "I found a Hymn book...and spelled out, "When I Can Read My Title Clear." I was so happy when I saw that I could really read, that I ran around telling all the other slaves "(Cornelius 71). Sella Martin also remembered vividly his "click of comprehension" the day he first discovered he could actually understand the ideas represented by words on a printed page. Trying to learn to read so that he could run away from slavery and be reunited with his mother, he persuaded a fellow hotel boy to give him a few lessons from the boy's book and had also gotten into the habit of spelling signs and trying to read advertisements on buildings. Slaves who saw him spelling out words assumed he could read, so one Sunday three older black men dragged him out into the woods, shoved a newspaper at him, and said, "Dare read dt ar, and tell us whut him say 'bout de bobblishhunis." Martin afraid, decided to bluff his way through, but found to his surprise that he actually could understand enough to make out the headline: "Henry Clay and Abolitionist." He was able to read enough word in the article to perceive that the editor was trying to show abolitionist tendencies in one of Clay's speeches. Martin recalled, "Of course I did not make out fully all the long words...but I made a new discovery about my being able to read at all, and that too, in a newspaper." Reading comprehension is "the process of bringing meaning to a text." Martin's great desire for his own freedom and his fellow slaves' hunger for knowledge about the climate of antislavery in their world brought meaning to a newspaper story about abolition and led to his discovery that he could read.

EMPOWERMENT

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire describes in his emancipatory literacy model the process of empowerment, which the slaves underwent upon gaining literacy. Central to Freire's approach to literacy is a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language an transformative agency, on the other. Within this perspective, literacy is not approached as merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent. Most importantly, literacy for Freire is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society. In this sense, literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment. Moreover, the issue of literacy and power does not begin and end with the process of learning how to read and write critically; instead, it begins with the fact of one's existence as part of a historically constructed practice within specific relations of power. That is, human beings within particular social and cultural formations are the starting point for analyzing not only how they actively construct their own experiences within ongoing relations of power, but also how social construction of such experiences provides them with the opportunity to give meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment. Thus, literacy for Freire is part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. To be able to name one's experience is part of

what it means to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society. For Freire, language and power are inextricably intertwined and provide a fundamental dimension of human agency and social transformation (Freire 7). For Freire, language also assures the power of envisagement: because we can name the world and thus hold it in mind, we can reflect on its meaning and imagine a changed world. Language is the means to a critical consciousness, which in turn, is the means of conceiving of change and of making choices to bring about further transformations. As the slaves became more educated, so did their powers of reflective thinking, hence critical conscious.

CRITICAL THINKING

In his narrative Douglass states:

> I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. In the same book, I met one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience

of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery...The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers...I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but not ladder upon which to get out.

In The Life of Gustavus Vassa, Vassa reflects:

Such a tendency has the slave-trade to debauch men's minds, and harden them to every feeling of humanity! For I will not suppose that the dealers in slaves were born worse than other men. No; it is the fatality of this mistaken avarice, that it corrupts milk of of human kindness and turns it to gall...
Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you-"No." When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your conduct, an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they're not honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet

you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil or moor that culture would be lost on them; and that they came from a climate, where nature, though prodigal of her bounties in a degree unknown to yourselves, has left man alone scant and unfinished, and incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him!-An assertion at once impious and absurd. Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? And are ye not struck with shame and mortification, to see the partakers of your nature reduced so low? But, above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection? Nor would it surprising: for when

No peace is given
To us enslav'd, but custody severe
And stripes and arbitrary punishment
Inflicted- What peace can we return?
But to our power, hostility and hate ,
Untam'd reluctance, and revenge, tho'slow,
Yet ever plotting how the conqueror least
May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice
In doing what we most in suff'ring feel? Milton

WRITING

To the enslaved African-American, writing was an even more important skill to acquire than reading. And writing skills were even harder to acquire than reading skills because writing involved the making and mastery of special equipment; it was much easier to recite the alphabet than to cope with the acquisition of ink, paper, penknives, and so forth. This lack of equipment was particularly acute in the rural South, where pens and paper were not common household articles. To solve this problem, one ingenious slave cut out blocks from pine bark and smoothed them for tablets, cut sticks from white oak or hickory for pens, and soaked knots from oak trees overnight to make ink. Others simply practiced by writing with their fingers on the ground or in the sand (Cornelius 72).

There were other reasons slaves found it harder to learn to write than to read. Owners and other whites were more reluctant to teach this potentially dangerous skill. Writing was a path to freedom. John Warren a slaves in Mississippi bought a copy of the letters in cursive writing from a white boy for the considerable sum of half a dollar. He had never seen anyone write, so he didn't know how to hold the pen correctly. However, as he related after he had escaped from slavery, "I kept that copy of the letters three years, and learned to write from it." Warren used his skill to write three passes for himself and, with the passes, ran away to Canada. Warren's story shows the most obvious and immediate reward for learning to write. Other slaves gained temporary freedom, including Stephen Jordan, who wrote passes for himself so could see his wife on another Louisiana plantation. Mobility could result from writing ability; slaves who could read and write could be chosen to travel with the master so that if anything happened to him they could write back home.

For many, literacy was the pathway to individual freedom. Douglass states:

...after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs.Auld,

> she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C... Mr. Auld found out what was going on and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read..."If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master-to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...if you teach that nigger, there would be no keeping him. From that moment, I understood the pathway to freedom...I set out with a high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn to read.

IDENTITY

Literacy skills for the slave was also a mechanism for forming identity, the freedom to become a person, according to James Olney. Olney finds significance in Douglass' conclusion to his narrative, which he ended with the words, "I subscribe myself...Frederick Douglass." According to Olney, " in that lettered utterance is assertion of identity and in identity is freedom-freedom from slavery, freedom from ignorance, freedom from non-being, freedom even from time," since writing endures beyond a moment or even beyond a lifetime (Cornelius 2). This same assertion can be made for other authors of the narrtives who saw fit to write "written by himself" and or "written by herself". These inscriptions seemed to affirm their being and act as validation of their being. Along with this, literacy reinforced an image of self-worth: Lucius Holsey, who tried desperately to learn to read while an enslaved houseboy, "felt that constitutionally he was created the equal of any person here on earth and that, given a chance, he could rise

to the height of any man," and that books were the path to proving himself as a human being (Cornelius 2).

When African-Americans fought to gain literacy, they expressed a desire for freedom and self-determination which had deep roots in modern culture. The movement towards universal literacy and written culture is one the most important democratic developments in the modern world. While scholars of literacy recognize literacy's usefulness as a medium of social control and industrial training, the majority still agree that the basic result of literacy has been and is one of liberation. As Roger Chartier explains in his study of the beginning of universal written culture in the Renaissance, "personal communion with a read or written text liberated the individual from the old mediators, freed him or her from the control of the group, and made it possible to cultivate an inner life." The ability to read and write gave people the power to relate in new ways to one another and to authority. According to Harvey Graff, few in the modern world would question "the value of literacy for achieving fulfilling, productive, expanding, and participating lives of freedom" (Cornelius 3).

RESISTANCE

For enslaved African-Americans, literacy was more than a path to individual freedom-it was a communal act, a political demonstration of resistance to oppression and of self-determination for the Black community. Douglass says,

> ...I devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read...Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught

> them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like the bettering the condition of my race...I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency.

RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

Literacy was also linked with freedom during slavery because it facilitated the African-American's creation of a liberating religious consciousness within the slave community. To be able to read the Bible was the first ambition of the converted illiterate Christian since, according to evangelical Protestantism, the individual should search the Scriptures in order to be saved. Enslaved African-Americans developed their own communities and culture and centered them around religion. Creative community-building, as it is termed by Margaret Creel, was a form of resistance to oppression through the religion developed in antebellum black communities, a religion which served as a positive force enabling slaves to remain spiritually free (Cornelius 85).

To the African-American religious leader, the ability to read was both spiritual and utilitarian, two functions which are not divided in the African religious view as they are in the European. African belief systems are not only integrative, but adaptive and practical. This is why, although many historians have described the separate churches in the plantation community--the black church often secret, in the quarters, and the white church, sponsored by the slaveowner and sometimes supervised by the white family--slave religion was a mixture of both, a syn

thesis of selected Christian teachings and traditional African beliefs and practices. Africans-Americans preferred to hold their own worship services and observances free from white control, but they borrowed selectively from white theology and borrowed and adapted white hymns, sacraments, and liturgy (Cornelius 92).

The leaders of black religion under slavery were the key to the resistance through community building which Creel describes. Literacy was one of the tools the preacher used; he or she was expected to learn to read and write in order to guide fellow slaves as they formed their religious community. Knowledge was a necessary part of resistance against the slave system and the leader was expected to provide this knowledge. Religious leadership was inevitably linked with literacy; for centuries in Christian societies, even where the majority of people were illiterate, religious leaders were expected to be able to read the Scriptures and interpret them for the rest of the people. Black religion became the focus for resistance to white oppression, so most African-Americans responded to religion only when it was preached by one of their own (Cornelius 86).

By the last decades of slavery, with only a few exceptions, black people had fashioned a religious faith which embraced Christianity as a system of morals, a promise for a future life and a "spiritual release from anxieties, frustrations, and animosities," but they rejected Christianity as practiced by white slave holders. Fredrick Douglass in his narrative says,

> What I have said respecting religion and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slave-holding religion of the land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference -so wide, that you receive the one is good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as

> bad, corrupt, and wicked....I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.

The black church leaders preached the gospel of freedom and God's support and justice for oppressed peoples. Scholars of black religion and black theology have found a "close and explicit relationship between religion and resistance." Black Christians believed that the Bible spoke to them in a special way, and they resented the slaveholders' abuse of God's word. Therefore, it was crucial that some people in the slave community gain reading skills, to "take the Bible back," to read what it really said. In some instances, the white sermon was followed by a later, secret meeting to "set the record straight." Among the slaves there was a quest for individual and collective spiritual development, which reaffirms the integral function of the black church as the core of the black community (Cornelius 88). But the African-American used the Bible in an additional way, creating with its imagery a new reality from the slave experience. The ability to read the Bible, therefore, gave the reader the special mastery and control over this "sacred text" essential to leadership in the black church. Religious leaders who wrote their autobiographies drew tightly the connection between religion and reading. They stated that they wanted to learn to read as a result of their conversion and their desire to preach. In his narrative, preacher Peter Randolph described his reaction to conversion at age ten:

> After receiving this revelation from the Lord, I became impressed that I was called of God to preach to the other slaves...but then I could not read the Bible, and I thought I could never preach unless I learned to read the Bible...A friend showed me the letters and how to spell words...Then

> I continued, until I got so as to read the Bible,-the great book of God, -the source of all knowledge.

African-Americans who could read were designated preachers by their own people as well as by whites; they were respected by black people as religious authorities because they held the key to the Bible without having to depend on whites to interpret Scriptures to them (Cornelius 3).

Traditional "Bible literacy" in the Western world emphasized the reception of the Word from authorities, so religious motives for learning to read are often considered passive, not liberating. For enslaved African-Americans, on the other hand, there was a "close relationship between religion and resistance." The African world view makes no distinction between the secular and the religious; spirituality is at the core of existence. Therefore, it was through the black church, "the new religion of oppressed people," that resistance was fashioned. According to Margaret Creel, the religion shaped by enslaved African-Americans "offered a politic for collective consciousness and group conformation within an African-Christian synthesis." The African-American collective religious faith was "a progressive force and shield against white psychological and cultural domination." Their faith provided African-Americans with a will to create and the courage to persevere, helping them to remain spiritually free in spite of physical bondage. Former slaves recalled their determination to learn to read the Bible as an act of rebellion against white oppression (Cornelius 87).

For the enslaved African-American, literacy was the key to spiritual, mental and in some cases physical freedom. Few had illusions that their lives would be automatically transformed, but for them literacy provided a release from the darkness of ignorance; it was a means to self-worth and

identity. It provided a way to transcend the hardships, a way to persevere and to endure. For the slave, literacy provided an avenue to freedom.

LEARNING TO READ

Very soon the Yankee teachers
Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs did hateit,-
It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge didn't agree with slavery-
'Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
A little from the book,
And put the works together,
And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell
Who took pot liquor fat
And greased the pages of his book,
And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen
The leaves upon his head,
He'd have thought them greasy papers,
But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,
Who Heard the children spell,
And picked the words right up by heart,
And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood right up and helped us,
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And I longed to read by Bible,
For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
And straight to work I went,

And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and testament.

Then I got a little cabin -
A place to call my own -
And felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne.

Francis E. W. Harper
1873

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